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## Casting on a **STITCH**

Gopika Nath talks to **Hemchhaya De** about a whole new language for Indian embroidery and other crafts

**I**n The Piercing Needle, an arts and crafts exhibition held in Kolkata, Gopika Nath presented herself as an artist-craftsperson. Using embroidery as an artistic marker and with the needle as a substitute for a pencil, Gopika forges a strong bond with ancient traditions of hand-crafting in India. Excerpts from the interview:

### **At what age were you drawn to the arts?**

I went to a convent school and learned embroidery, but I have very little recollection of this. You can say that's where I started. However, one of the most memorable birthday presents that I got as a young girl of 11 or 12 years, was a cross-stitch embroidery kit, with some hand towels to be embroidered and some rather elaborate embroidery patterns. I am not sure if this was a defining moment, because at some point in my life I wanted to be a doctor. It is, however, a powerful memory.

### **Why did you choose to focus on ancient Indian crafts?**

I trained as a textile designer, first in Delhi and then in London, at the Central School of Art and Design. I wasn't specially drawn to the ancient Indian crafts but enjoyed the nuances of contemporary textile design. In my final year of B.A. (Hons) degree programme, I had to submit a thesis. My subject was 'The Architectural Ornamentation at Fatehpur Sikri and Agra' and while researching this, I chanced upon the writings of art historian Ananada K. Coomaraswamy. His writings



Gopika Nath

on the practices of ancient art made a mark, but even so, it was not until much later in my career as a textile designer that I started looking at his thoughts and ideas and exploring them. It was when I started working as an artist-craftsperson (first while painting fabrics-sarees and later with embroidery) that I began understanding not just the wisdom of these ancient practices, but became interested in wanting to explore these ideas.

### **How do you give a modern language to traditional Indian embroidery?**

The language of stitch has been with us since Vedic times where the ancients used textile-making

terminology as a metaphor for life. The Saint poets such as Kabir and Namdev have also used sewing, cloth and other such textile-related terms to speak about life-philosophies. Through my online stitch journal, [gopikanathstitchjournal.blogspot.com](http://gopikanathstitchjournal.blogspot.com), I have used these age-old ideas to speak of the same sort of thing in a contemporary vein. For instance, the idea of the needle being an instrument of violence and also that the piercing needle can penetrate layers of memory, experience, pain and more to become a tool for self-realisation, a tool to understand where it is that one is coming from and what are the subconscious patterns that create the life that one is living today. >